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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effects of friendship on seventh and eighth graders' self-esteem. The study assessed: (1) whether changes in adolescents' self-esteem during a school year were related to the quality of their friendships early in the year; and (2) whether friends' ratings of their self-esteem became more similar over the course of the year. The study included 297 students, all of whom completed Harter's Self-Perception Profile for Children in the fall and spring of the school year, and described the positive and negative features of their best friendships. Findings indicated that changes during the year in adolescents' global self-worth were not related to the quality of their fall friendships, but having friendships with many positive features was related to decreases during the year in perceived athletic competence and increases during the year in perceived physical appearance. By contrast, the study found that having stable friendships with many negative features was related to increases in perceived athletic competence. The findings suggest that adolescents perceive their competence as varying in different domains, and that friendships have distinctive effects on the various domains of self-perception. (SM)

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Effects of friendship on adolescents' self-esteem

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ABSTRACT

Seventh and eighth graders (N = 297) reported on multiple aspects of their self-esteem during the fall of a school year. The adolescents also described the positive and negative features of their best friendships. These assessments were repeated during the following spring. Changes during the year in adolescents' global self-worth (or general self-esteem) were not related to the quality of their fall friendships, but having friendships with many positive features was related to decreases during the year in perceived athletic competence. Having stable friendships with many positive features was related to increases during the year in perceived physical appearance. By contrast, having stable friendships with many negative features was related to increases in perceived athletic competence. Adolescents were similar to their friends in several aspects of self- esteem. Friends' similarity in perceived behavioral conduct increased during the year, as adolescents influenced their friends and vice versa.

INTRODUCTION

Theorists have discussed two pathways by which adolescents' friendships might influence their self-esteem. The first pathway is concerned with the quality of adolescents' friendships. Having intimate and supportive friendships may increase adolescents' sense that they are valuable, and so boost their general self-esteem. Evidence from correlational studies shows that the quality of adolescents' friendships is related to their self-esteem. However, correlational data are not adequate for testing the hypothesis that friendship quality affects self-esteem.

The second pathway of influence is concerned with the characteristics of a particular adolescent's friends. Adolescents whose friends are high in self-esteem may, over time, begin to feel more positively about themselves. Adolescents whose friends are low in self-esteem may, over time, begin to feel more negatively about themselves. In short, interactions with friends may gradually cause adolescents' self-esteem to become more like that of their friends. Of course, adolescents may influence their friends as well as being influenced by them. The net result of this mutual process could be increased similarity in the self-esteem of adolescents and their friends.

We examined hypotheses derived from both theoretical perspectives in a short- term longitudinal design. More specifically, we assessed (a) whether changes in adolescents' self-esteem during a school year were related to the quality of their friendships early in the year, and (b) whether friends' similarity in self-esteem increased during the year.

METHOD

The study included 297 students in the seventh and eighth grades. During the fall semester, the students completed Susan Harter's Self-Perception Profile for Children. This measure includes subscales for global self-worth (or general self-esteem) and self-perceptions of scholastic competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance, and behavioral conduct. The students also named up to three best friends. Then they answered standard questions about the positive features (e.g., intimacy) and negative features (e.g., conflicts and rivalry) of each friendship. For example, one question about positive features was, "How often do you tell this friend things about yourself that you wouldn't tell most kids?" One question about negative features was, "How often does this friend show off or brag about doing something better than you?" The students answered 12 questions about positive features and 8 questions about negative features. The internal consistency of measures based on the mean scores for all questions about the positive features and negative features of all friendships were .96 and .88, respectively.

The same procedures were used again in the spring, about six months later. At both times, most of the friends named by the students were also in the sample. Therefore, students' scores could usually be matched with their friends' scores for self-esteem. Over 88% of the students in the study could be matched to one or more friends. The matching procedure allowed us to assess the actual similarity between students and their friends on each aspect of self-esteem at each time.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Relations of Friendship to Self-Esteem

Students who described their friendships as having more positive features perceived their global self-worth more positively at both times (see Table 1). They also had higher scores on several subscales for self-esteem. Students who described their friendships as having more negative features perceived their global self-worth more negatively and had lower scores on other self-esteem subscales, especially behavioral conduct. These findings suggest that negative interactions with friends merit more attention, because frequent negative interactions are associated with more negative views of self in several domains.

Students who had more stable friendships had higher scores on several subscales for self-esteem, especially behavioral conduct. However, the correlations of friendship stability with perceived athletic competence were negative. Students higher in perceived athletic competence tended to have less stable friendships.

Effects of Friendship Features on Self-Esteem

Multiple regression analyses were used to test the hypothesis that the quality of students' friendships affects their self-esteem. Students' scores in the spring on each self-esteem subscale were used as the criteria in regression

analyses with the corresponding fall scores as the first predictors and the fall friendship measures as additional predictors.

Contrary to hypothesis, the changes during the year in students' global self-worth were unrelated to their reports about the positive features of their friendships in the fall (beta = .01). Apparently, friendship quality has weaker or less direct effects on self-esteem than previous correlational data implied.

Reports on the positive features of fall friendships were related to changes during the year in perceived athletic competence (beta = -.11, $p < .01$). The negative beta weight indicates that students who described their friendships more positively declined in perceived athletic competence during the year. This result suggests some incompatibility between having supportive friendships and being successful in sports.

Friendship features did not significantly affect the changes during the year in other facets of self-esteem. One possible explanation for this result is that the regression analyses lumped together the effects of friendships that lasted for the full year and those that ended sometime during the year. To distinguish the two, the analyses were repeated with terms included for friendship stability and the product of friendship stability and positive (or negative) friendship features.

In the new analyses, perceived physical appearance in the spring was predicted by the product of friendship stability and positive friendship featur (beta = .10, $p < .05$). This result indicates that students with better friendships in the fall improved in perceived physical appearance during the year when their friendship were more stable. Also, perceived athletic competence in the spring was predicted by the product of friendship stability and negative friendship features (beta = .08, $p < .05$). Thus perceived athletic competence increased during the year when students had stable friendships that were high in conflicts and rivalry. In other words, negative interactions with friends increased perceived athletic competence, especially i those friendships were stable.

Friends' Similarity and Friends' Influence on Self-Esteem

In the fall, students and their friends had similar perceptions of their scholastic competence, social acceptance, and behavioral conduct (see Table 2 Previous research has shown that adolescents are similar to friends in their academic achievement, social status, and aggressive behavior. Our data suggest that these similarities in behavior and status are matched by similarities in self-perceptions.

The correlations for friends' similarity in perceived physical appearance and behavioral conduct were significantly higher in the spring than in the fal

To see whether the increases in similarity could be attributed to friends' influence on each other, another set of multiple regression analyses was done. In the new analyses the subscales for students' self-esteem in the spring were the criterion variables, the corresponding subscales for the fall were the first predictors, and the actual scores of friends on the same subscales were additional predictors. Only one effect was significant. The changes during the year in students' perceptions of their conduct were related to their friends' perceived conduct in the fall (beta = .10, $p < .01$). Apparently, students' perceptions of their conduct were influenced by those of their friends. The most likely route of influence is through actual behavior. Friends probably influenced one another's behavior and so influenced one another's perceptions of conduct.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Although adolescents who had more intimate and supportive friendships also tended to have higher global self-worth (or general self-esteem), the longitudinal analyses did not show any effect of support from friends on changes in self-esteem.

2. Having supportive friendships did improve adolescents' perceptions of their physical appearance, if these friendships were stable during the year.

3. Having supportive friendships seemed to decrease adolescents' perceptions of their athletic competence. Having more negative interactions with friends increased perceived athletic competence, if these friendships were stable. These findings imply that rivalry in friendships, and a relative lack of supportive interactions, characterize the friendships of adolescents who excel in competitive sports.

4. Adolescents and their friends are similar in several aspects of self-esteem, because self-esteem often has a basis in reality. Friends' perceptions of their conduct become more similar over time, apparently because friends influence one another's conduct.

5. Taken together, the findings suggest that current hypotheses about the effects of friendship on self-esteem are inadequate. Adolescents perceive their competence as varying in different domains, and friendships have distinctive effects on the various domains of self-perception.

Table 1

Relations of Friendship Measures to Self-esteem at Each Time

Measure	Self-esteem Subscale					
	Scholastic competence	Social acceptance	Athletic competence	Physical appearance	Behavioral conduct	Global self-worth
Positive features						
Fall	.14*	.32**	.01	.06	.17*	.14*
Spring	.10	.26**	-.06	.01	.16*	.16*
Negative features						
Fall	-.12*	-.09	.01	-.16*	-.25**	-.26**
Spring	-.07	-.14*	-.05	-.11	-.26**	-.20**
Friendship stability						
Fall	.25**	.12*	-.10	.07	.29**	.17*
Spring	.19**	.09	-.12*	.09	.24**	.10

*p<.05. **p <.001.

Table 2

Correlations for Friends' Similarity in Facets of Self-esteem at Each Time

Measure	Similarity Correlation	
	Fall	Spring
Scholastic competence	.14*	.18*
Social acceptance	.28**	.23**
Athletic competence	.11	.11
Physical appearance	.02	.20**
Behavioral conduct	.23**	.37**
Global self-worth	.08	.15*

*p<.05. **p<.001.

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